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Death Comes for a Snitch Who Recanted

Harvey Matusow

BY BRUCE JACKSON

Harvey Matusow, the most notorious of the paid perjurious snitches for the Communist witch-hunters in 1950s, died in New Hampshire on January 17 at the age of 75.

Matusow worked for Senator Joseph McCarthy and testified for the Senate Internal Security Committee, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and any other federal and state Commie witch-hunting committee that would have him. He testified in trials against people charged with being or having been Communists. He testified against the Girl Scouts and the New York Times. He testified against just about anything that moved, breathed, was incorporated, or that hung out now and then.

We talked for several hours in his Central Park West apartment one morning in late 1966 or 1967. I was working on a study of LSD users and he was then proselytizing for acid with the same religious fervor he'd sold subscriptions to *The Daily Worker* in his Communist days, had been an anti-Communist in his informer days, and then an anti-anti-Communist in his post-informer days.

That afternoon, I described the encounter to Irwin Silber, editor of *Sing Out!* magazine. "Do I know him?" Irwin yelled, even though it was just two of us in the room "That sonofabitch *turned me in*!"

Later that day, I saw a musician friend, Hedy West, and I told her about the coincidence of my morning meeting with Matusow and Silber's having been one of his victims. "Harvey Matusow turned my father in," Hedy said."He testified that my father was organizing Communist Boy Scout troops in Georgia. They'd never met, but that didn't matter to Matusow or the people he was working for. My father's response was, 'Where I was in Georgia, 12-year-old boys weren't playing Boy Scout; they were working in the mines'".

Matusow got the guiltys, recanted, and wrote a book about it, *False Witness* (1955). Because of that book, he went to prison for perjury – not for the countless acts of perjury he committed in saying hundreds of people he knew nothing about were Communists or Communist agents, but rather for having said he'd lied and that Roy Cohn knew about it which, according to all sources, was true. He did 44 months of a five-year sentence for that.

In September 1988, I had a conversation about Matusow with Emile de Antonio, who made several splendid films about the Cold War, including *Point of Order* (1964), the best documentary anyone has yet made about Senator Joseph McCarthy. I think he understood the goofy politics of that decade better than anyone I ever met. This is some of what De said about Harvey and his times:

De Antonio: It was scary in the 50's. Two ex-FBI men ran the great snitch sheet. They made a fortune out of clearing people. Communism is a business in America; anti-Communism is an industry. These two jokers had been making $25,000 a year in the FBI. They went out and they were the big experts on people infiltrating the media. They'd say to you, "Honey, I know that you were a member of the this and that. You give me $2,000 and you'll be cleared. You can go to work for CBS. You can go to work for the *New York Times*." They cleared people.

They would say "We have observed the documents and we understand what they really mean. She was an innocent victim and we guarantee it."

(**Matusow** *continued on page 2)*

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And then Matusow went before the government and said, "I lied. I never knew Jenks. I don't know a goddam thing about Jenks. I don't know if he was a Communist or a Martian or an ape."

I knew the two guys. They were two criminals, of course. They made a whole bunch of money. Amazing people. They lived in the biggest houses. Do you know what CBS paid those people? It was thousands of dollars a week. Just to prove that you *weren't* a Communist. Or that you had been a Communist but weren't one now."Now that you've come to talk to us, we know that you`ve repented sincerely."

Bruce: And getting you to betray your friends who were still out there.

De: Or to make up people. That's what you really had to do, because finally you'd run out of people, wouldn't you? I mean how many Communists do you know? So you've gotta throw in a couple.

Bruce: Like Harvey Matusow. Do you remember Harvey?

De: He's a good friend of mine. I hate to say this, but I sent him $50 yesterday. He called up and I sent him $50. He makes the most beautiful things. He makes my wife sleep. He's taken military shells of different heights and he makes Buddhist gongs of them and they make the most beautiful sounds. It's for peace, you know, and they make you fall asleep.

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Matusow didn't know anything. He just wanted to be famous and have money. He didn't know a goddamned thing about anything. He's told me all of this. He's written about it. He's not ashamed of it. He'd go to Illinois and they'd say, "Now Mr. Matusow, you're an expert. You're a friend of Joseph McCarthy and of Roy Cohen and of HUAC and we want to clean Illinois of Communists. Can you tell us all the Communists in our schools here?"

And he'd say, "Of course I can." He didn't know one person in Illinois. What he did was, he went to the public library, he looked up the American Legion lists of supposed Communists in Illinois, and then he'd say, "Now these people, of my own knowledge I can certify that these people – you, you and you – are all Communists." He gave four or five hundred names from the list that the American Legion had compiled of Communists, names that the American Legion had compiled over years. They were in the library. Then he would appear before the state senate or the house of representatives of the state of Illinois, or Ohio, wherever he was. He did this.

Then one day he couldn't stand himself.

He turned in a handsome wonderful leftwing guy named Jenks, who was the head of the Mine Smelter's Union in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Jenks was sent to jail for five years.

And then Matusow went before the government and said, "I lied. I never knew Jenks. I don't know a goddam thing about Jenks. I don't know if he was a Communist or a Martian or an ape. I don't know anything about him." And the government gave him five years for lying. For lying. Lying! I don't know if you can understand that. It's so crazy. Matusow did time for telling the truth about having lied.

Bruce: But the people who went to jail or lost their jobs because of his testimony didn't get anything reversed.

De: He came out of jail and came to New York and the only people in New York on the left who would speak to him were Mark Lane and me. The people on the left blackballed him. They said, "You were a bastard. You were an informer. You told all the time." But you had to see that he himself tried to get out and he told the truth, at the end at least. I'm not God, so therefore I can't condemn people that way.

Bruce: Before he became an informer, he sold more subscriptions than anybody to *The Daily Worker*, and he was very proud of that. He told me he was hurt when his former friends started saying that the only reason he sold so many subscriptions was because he was paying for them with FBI money. "I really *did* sell those subscriptions," he said. "I sold more subscriptions than *anybody*."

De: That was in the Bronx on the street. You know why he called me yesterday? He's always hustling for a buck. He said, "De, both you and I knew Roy."

I said, "Yeah."

"Remember Roy lived up on such and such an avenue in the Bronx. His father was a judge and I lived only four blocks away."

I said, "How could you live only four blocks away when you were so poor and he was rich?"

He said, "Because the railroad came in between."

Then he said, "You know, I used to know Phil Rizutto. I used to be the bat boy for the Yankees."

I said, "You were *never* the bat boy for the Yankees."

He said, "Well, no, but I *offered* to be the bat boy for the Yankees."

He lies all the time. I like him anyway. I can't help it. He's a great character.

So then he said, "I'm trying to get some money for this house. I don't have any money. I'll send you some bells."

I said, "I already have the bells."

He said, "I'll send you some more bells."

I said, "OK, I'll send you $50." That was yesterday.

He's a character out of an early novel, an early American novel, a shabby thief who has a moment of honor and he's punished for it. The one time he tells the truth he goes to jail. He lies now, he lied before. But when he told the truth – out! That says something about our culture in the days of the Cold War.

Bruce: It also says something about Harvey.

De: Well, Harvey lies about everything.

Bruce Jackson is SUNY Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for Studies in American Culture at Buffalo.

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Waylon Jennings: An Honest Outlaw

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

"To live outside the law you must be honest," Bob Dylan sings in Absolutely Sweet Marie, a tune that has always struck me as a comic rejoinder to Leadbelly's prison song Midnight Special. But that celebrated line is also an epitaph for the life and career of Waylon Jennings.

Jennings was an outlaw in all the right respects, not least as an outlaw to a corrupt industry that was exploiting him and his cohorts. At great professional risk, Jennings defied the pious and rigid lords of Nashville, the country purists of the Opry, who sneered at pop sounding songs and banned full drum sets from their stage. He fought as fiercely as Chuck D or Pearl Jam against the bosses of the record biz who rip off songwriters, defile the sound and content of recordings, and treat performers as chattels.

When you look back on Jennings' life and music you're struck by his honesty, his courage and, as Dave Marsh points out his humor.

He was born in Littlefield, Texas in 1937 and moved to Lubbock in 1954, where he worked as DJ and played in rockabilly bands. He was to develop an inimitable rough-edged and rumbling sound, a voice as arid and tough as a west Texas wind. But he got his start working for one of the smoothest voices in rock history, Buddy Holly. From 1958 to 1959, Jennings toured as Holly's bassplayer in Holly's band, the Crickets.

There is a star-crossed aspect to Jenning's life, that lends to his career the hint of myth, as if he were as close as country would ever come to a Robert Johnson legend. Jennings didn't sell his soul to the devil at the crossroads in return for blazing guitar licks, but he did, at the last possible moment, offer his seat on a plane on a frigid night in Clear Lake, Iowa to J.P. Richardson, the Big Bopper.

"I remember the last time I saw Buddy", Jennings said last year. "He had me go get us some hot dogs. He was leaning back against the wall in a cane-bottom chair and he was laughing at me. He said, 'So you're not going with us tonight on the plane, huh? Well, I hope your ol' bus freezes up. It's 40-below out there and you're gonna get awful cold.' So I said, 'Well, I hope your ol' plane crashes.'

"I was so afraid for many years that somebody was going to find out I said that. Somehow I blamed myself. Compounding that was the guilty feeling that I was still alive."

In the 70s Jennings came into his own with songs like Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love), I've Always Been Crazy, I Don't Want to Get Over You and Waymore's Blues. His music (and his collaborations with Willie Nelson, who was also breaking loose from the shackles of Nashville) gave grit and substance to American music at a time when rock had flatlined into the likes of Journey and REO Speedwagon. The elemental spirit of rock'n'roll thrived in Jennings' country music, the sound at once old and new.

Jennings embodied that strange alchemy of American music, a music that was both popular and uncompromising, a sound that paid allegiance to Hank Williams, Son House and Buddy Holly and yet was unmistakably original. "I've always felt that blues, rock 'n' roll and country are just about a beat apart," Jennings said. In his music, at times, they blended into one.

Jennings grinned and said, "Man, what are you doing working for these assholes?" "Huh? We don't want the Republicans to take over the country again, do we?"

I had the undeserved fortune to meet Waylon Jennings in the summer of 1978, when he came to Indianapolis to play at a fundraiser for Senator Birch Bayh, the perennially embattled Democrat. I was working as gopher for the Bayh campaign, shuttling bigwigs around in a rented black Lincoln. God knows how he got hooked into doing a gig for Bayh, one of the more unappetizing politicians of his time. Most likely it was as a favor to Bayh's charismatic and brilliant wife, Marvella, who was to die of breast cancer a few years later.

I was supposed to drive Jennings from the concert to his hotel, about a mile away. But he wasn't quite ready to endure an entire night in downtown Indianapolis. He wanted to drive around. After a while, Jennings turned to me, grinned and said, "Man, what are you doing working for these assholes?"

"Huh? We don't want the Republicans to take over the country again, do we?"

"Not a dime's worth of difference between them." He was right of course. But I'm a slow learner and it took me another decade to figure that out on my own.

Jennings pulled a cassette from the pocket of his black vest. "Stick this in that machine", he said.

It was a country blues, featuring a guitar as clear as a bell and a voice as ragged as a crosscut saw. "Oh the Rocky Mountains, they's a mean and terrible place."

At that time, it was my misfortune to know less about music than I did about politics. "Who is that?"

He shook his head in amazement, convinced he was talking with an imbecile. "That's Sam Hopkins, son. Now just kick this damn Lincoln into gear and drive."

As we rolled through the night, Jennings sat next to me, tapping his booted foot to the beat, working his way through a fifth of George Dickle, Tennessee's finest sipping bourbon.

We drove 30 miles west of the city on Route 40, the old National Road, into the heart of the heartland. "This'll be fine", he said. "Pull down that gravel road there."

I stopped the car in what was little more than a tractor lane, hemmed in by 12-foot-tall walls of sweet corn.

"What are we doing?"

"Come on out here and join me, Hoss," Jennings growled. "Let's take a piss in this cornfield and watch those damn meteors. Now don't they look just like the rebel angels falling down from the heavens."

Overhead the Perseid meteor shower was in full bloom—one meteor after another slashed across the August night.

To this day I've rarely missed a chance to escape from the city lights in August and watch those rebel angels fall from the sky, with my favorite bluesman, Lightnin' Hopkins, providing the soundtrack. Thanks for that Waylon, and for everything else. CP

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The Pledge that Won the Election

Bush and Yucca Mountain

Back in the fall of 2000 the state of Nevada suddenly came into play in the desperately close presidential election. At the time, Al Gore had barely mentioned the environment. But he did tell the people of Nevada that he would veto any move by Congress to ship nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain. His numbers in Nevada promptly jumped.

Nevada's Republican governor, Kenny Guinn, made haste to warn the Bush campaign that unless the Republican candidate took a stand on Yucca Mountain, he was in danger of losing the state, a defeat that might cost him the presidency. "I can think of no issue more important to the people of Nevada than nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain", Guinn said.

Bush swiftly responded by sending a letter making a similar pledge to Nevada's governor. "I would veto legislation that would provide for the temporary storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain", Bush wrote in a letter in September 2000. Bush went on to say that he would base his decision not on politics, but on "sound science".

Bush's pledge had its intended effect on the Nevada electorate. He bounced back, beat Gore by a slim 20,000 votes and captured Nevada's four crucial electoral college votes. It gave him the election as surely as did the Supreme Court and the fraudulent Florida recount. But Bush was in a bind. Was he going to keep the promise he made to the people of Nevada or the unstated one to the nuclear industry, which had dumped $300,000 into his campaign coffers?

It wasn't even a close call. On February 15 of this year he broke his campaign promise and signed off on the Yucca Mountain dump scheme developed by Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham. Abraham has also enjoyed the nuclear lobby's largesse, which had poured $80,000 into his losing campaign to hold on to his US senate seat from Michigan.

The Bush betrayal has enraged Nevada's Guinn, who has secured $4.3 million from the state legislature to fight Bush in federal court. "We're in the fight for our lives," Guinn proclaims.

Yucca Mountain is located on Western Shoshone lands, just a crap shot roll from the ever-expanding boundaries of Las Vegas. Despite its location near Vegas and on top of a faultline, Yucca Mountain was the only site studied by the federal government to entomb the nation's high-level radioactive waste - 77,000 tons of mostly spent fuel pellets from commercial power reactors. The waste will travel to Nevada by truck and rail from more than 70 sites across the country, crossing 45 states along the way. Anti-nuke activists have dubbed the plan Mobile Chernobyl, and point out that the nuke trains will present an inviting target for terrorists. "Nuclear waste is perhaps the deadliest material created by humans," says Anna Aurilia of the US Public Interest Research Group. "Waste from commercial nuclear reactors is so radioactive that transport casks to shield us from the radiation would be too heavy to be economically transported. Current truck casks, designed to hold a ton or so of irradiated fuel, weigh 25 to 26 tons and still leak some radiation. The bottom line is that nuclear waste cannot be transported safely."

Bush's pledge to keep Yucca Mountain from becoming a nuclear dump gave him the election as surely as the Supreme Court and the fraudulent Florida recount.

The state's Republican representative, Jim Gibbons, also laments Bush's decision, saying that he believed that the president had been "misled" by Abraham and top-level staffers had the Energy Department. "The president relied up on the scientific information presented by the Department of Energy, which for years has rushed head-long toward approving Yucca Mountain,"

In fact, the Energy Department has spent more than $7 billion studying the Yucca Mountain plan for the past 20 years and still reached no final conclusion as to whether it could safely store nuclear waste. The DoE's own contractor, Bechtel (scarcely what you might call a green sympathizer), concluded that there are still too many under answered questions. Just a few weeks ago, the General Accounting Office concluded that any site recommendation would be premature. Similar conclusions were reached by The Nuclear Waste Technical Review, a presidentially-appointed commission larded with pro-nuke flacks. It sided with the Bush decision, but slammed "the technical basis" for the DoE's scientific work at Yucca Mountain as "weak".

This is a decidedly bi-partisan scandal. Indeed, one of the last voices to court the Bush administration on behalf of the nuclear industry was none other than the woman who once ran against the president's father for vice-president, Geraldine Ferraro. Ferraro joined with John Sununu to lobby for the Yucca Mountain dump plan on behalf of the US Chamber of Commerce and a nuclear energy front group called the Alliance for Energy and Economic Growth.

Ferraro and Sununu both sit on the board of advisors of Grassroots Enterprise, a political consulting firm. The former vice president of Grassroots Enterprise, Kyle McSlarrow, is now chief of staff for Energy Secretary Abraham and was a key player in the Yucca Mountain decision and in the Bush administration's pro-nuclear energy plan. CP

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Diary of a Few Days: Jack Henry Abbott and Other Passages

By Alexander Cockburn

February 10, Petrolia.

Saul Landau has invited me to give a talk on the War on Terror at Cal Poly, Pomona. I'm packing the old '62 station wagon, readying myself spiritually and physically for a few days and 1,600 miles on the road when the phone rings. Emergency! Tariq Ali, the Anglo-Pakistani firebrand has just dropped out of a debate on the war on terror at a grad school event at Bob Brenner's center at UCLA. Can I pinch hit, head south immediately? The chink of gold disarms all hesitation. I drive five hours to Oakland Airport.

Ahead of me in the line in front of the security gate an old fellow in a wheel chair vainly protests the full personal search required by a polite guard. All I have to do is take off my shoes.

The nice black woman at Dollar Rental outside LAX sees I'm from Humboldt county and is eager to discuss the best ways of preparing deer meat. We review the problem of dryness. I impart the recipe for a port-based sauce.

The debate in UCLA is with David Rieff, son of Susan Sontag and a notable laptop bombardier; also with a fellow called Ben Schwartz who's the literary editor of the Atlantic Monthly. They express warm support for the war on Afghanistan, albeit salted with disquiet for the wider campaign against the Axis of Evil.

I speak last, launching off on the theme that wars on terror and on evil are nothing new in American history. Joe Paff has fixed me up with some red-blooded stuff from Teddy Roosevelt on the winning of the American west: "Not only were the Indians very terrible in battle, but they were cruel beyond all belief in victory; and the gloomy annals of border warfare are stained with their darkest hues… Such a war is inevitably bloody and cruel; but the inhuman love of cruelty for cruelty's sake, which marks the Red Indian above all other savages, rendered these wars more terrible than any others… It was inevitable, indeed it was in many instances proper, that such deeds should awake in the breasts of the whites the grimmest, wildest spirit of revenge and hatred."

Having braced the assembled flowers of academe with TR's ravings I plunge into forbidden territory, namely the causes of terrorism and whether G. Bush has done anything to diminish them, or improve the overall security of the people. My remarks are amiably received. The ensuing discussion is polite. Schwartz says that in the main he agrees with Roosevelt on Indians. We repair to a Thai restaurant. A lady professor (emerita) called Appleby is on my right. She describes with restrained eloquence her revulsion at my know-it-all rantings down the years.

That evening I watch the ice skating in Utah. The Russians are romantic, their skating complicated and beautiful. The Canadians, dowdy in gray fustian, perform relatively simple maneuvers, axels of ennui, you could say. The NBC commentators predict a Canadian triumph, even though any fool could see the Russians were operating on an entirely superior order of skill and imagination.

February 12, Los Angeles.

The newspaper tells me Jack Henry Abbot has been found hanged in his cell at a high security prison in upstate New York. The prison says it was suicide though his lawyer says that Abbott had been worried about attacks on him. Abbott was outside prison for only eight of his 58 years. There's a quote from Norman Mailer, saying he will always blame himself for having had a hand in getting Abbott paroled from prison, thus setting the scene for Abbott's almost immediate murder of Richard Adan a young actor, working as a waiter in the Binibon all-night restaurant in the Village, owned by his wife's parents. Adan wouldn't let Abbott use the employees' restroom. Abbott lured him into the street and stabbed him in the heart.

I remember it well, since that killing back in 1981 was greeted by the right as the ripest proof that on the issue of crime liberals had their heads up their asses. Abbott's collected prison letters to Mailer, In The Belly of the Beast, had been published seriatim in the New York Review, then by Random House. Mailer urged Abbott's release to the parole board and soon he was freed. He was the toast of the literati.

Indeed his prose had a compelling tempo, the sort of hectoring but eloquent con talk that seemed more impressive back then than now. "In prison we are all polite to each other: formal in our respect. We are serving years. If I have a verbal disagreement with someone, and I'm in the wrong, my apologies are given sincerely. But if I'm in the right and some asshole is wrong and he knows it, I have to see his face every day. If he threatened to kill me, I have to see him day in, day out for years. This is what leads to killing him over a seemingly trivial matter. All the violence in prison is geared for murder, nothing else. He could drop a knife in you any day. You learn to 'smile' him into position. To disarm him with friendliness. So when you are raging inside at anyone, you learn to conceal it, to smile or feign cowardice. You have to move into total activity from a totally inactive posture to sink a knife in as close to his heart as possible."

A detailed description of such a stabbing follows. "You've pumped the knife in several times without even being aware of it. You go to the floor with him to finish him. It

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is like cutting hot butter. No resistance at all. They always whisper one thing at the end: 'Please.'"

With praise for such writing ringing in his ears, Abbott went off to dinner and sank his knife into poor Adan. They caught him some weeks later in Louisiana. Back home in Petrolia I find my copy of In The Belly of The Beast, which I retrieved late in 1981 from the junk pile in the New York Review of Books. In it is Abbott's signed dedication to NYR editor Robert Silvers: "Bob Silvers, You deserve more than this! I'll try to write something better next time! In gratitude, Jack Abbott. June, 1981."

Mailer's introduction to Abbott's book is nothing he has to apologize for, particularly since there are now 2 million in America's prisons and jails, including 13 per cent of all black males between 25 and 29. "There is a paradox at the core of penology, and from it derives the thousand ills and afflictions of the prison system. It is that not only the worst of the young are sent to prison, but the best, that is, the proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising, and the most undefeated of the poor. There starts the horror. The fundamental premise of incarceration which Abbott demonstrates to us over and over, is that prison is equipped to grind down criminals who are cowards into social submission, but can only break the spirit of brave men who are criminals, or anneal them until they are harder than the steel that encloses them."

February 13. Pomona.

I like the Cal Poly campus. Saul instructs me that it was once the vast estate of Kellogg the corn flake king. He was fanatic on the subject of masturbation, presumably because of the waste of eugenic material. His own eugenic enthusiasms were mostly directed to the breeding of Arabian horses. When he left his thousands of acres to the state of California, the proviso was that his herd be properly stabled and maintained, which it is. I expound further on the war on terror to pleasant and intelligent students. Saul describes a recent visit to Cuba, to a conference on the Bay of Pigs. Present was Arthur Schlesinger, once a chorister of Camelot, still sprightly at 88. He continues to maintain that the Kennedy brothers knew nothing of the assassination attempts on Castro. Then the retired CIA man presiding over all attacks on Cuba describes the blood-thirsty orders for more assassination bids on Castro issued to him personally by "the Attorney General", meaning Robert Kennedy. Schlesinger blinks but says nothing. Chided by Landau for his whoring for Camelot, Schlesinger bristles, and says that if he had to do it over, he would do exactly the same thing: "It was so interesting."

February 14, Kernville.

I drive north with Barbara Yaley. While she interviews a prisoner in Tehachapi prison I buy provisions for our impending stay at California Hot Springs, near Porterville. Every year Barbara has lobbied me to share her enthusiasm for hot springs. Every year I have managed to postpone the rendez-vous. This year it looks as though my goose is cooked. Laden with provender and champagne I return to the prison. A sign alerts me to the probable presence of rattlesnakes, to their disinclination to attack unless provoked, to their entitlement to respect as members of the community. We head north, up past Lake Isabella, through Kernville, up along the Kern where I used to camp years ago. We climb up to about 5,000 feet, see a sign saying California Hot Springs 25 miles, and then, round a bend just beyond Johnsonville, there's a sign from the Forest Service: "Pass Closed." A couple of ranchers in a truck say the snow ahead is four feet deep.

So I live to soak another day. We retreat, pour mieux sauter some food in our motel. I can recommend the recently rehabbed Sequoia Lodge. Barbara regains her composure over asparagus prepared by me in our room, plus ribeye and shrimp across the road in a decent restaurant, all this in Riverkern, a few miles north of Kernville. Next day we drive through glorious oak covered mountainsides strewn with granite boulders. I promise Barbara, Next year, the hot springs, for sure. CP

Kellogg the corn flake king was fanatic on the subject of masturbation, presumably because of the waste of eugenic material.

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